

## Message Text

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SUBJ: POLITICAL PARTIES STIR IN THAILAND

REF: BANGKOK 7824

SUMMARY: ALTHOUGH POLITICAL PARTIES ARE STILL LEGALLY PROSCRIBED, THAI POLITICIANS ARE BEGINNING THE MANEUVERING PROCESS FROM WHICH PARTY ALIGNMENTS WILL EMERGE PRIOR TO GENERAL ELECTIONS, WHICH HAVE BEEN ANNOUNCED FOR LATER THIS YEAR OR EARLY 1979. THE DEMOCRATS SHOULD RE-EMERGE WITHOUT SENI PRAHOT AS THE LEADING PARTY FIGURE AND WITHOUT THOSE FEW DEMOCRATS, INCLUDING SAMAK SUNTHORAWET, WHO WERE CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH THE THANIN GOVERNMENT. IF HIS HEALTH PERMITS, KHUKRIT PRAMOT IS A GOOD PROSPECT TO LEAD THE SOCIAL ACTION PARTY (REFTEL REPORTS KHUKRIT RECENTLY SUFFERED MILD STROKE). THE NEW FORCE PARTY, WHICH SUFFERED HEAVY LOSSES IN THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF APRIL, 1976, FACES A MAJOR REORGANIZATION TASK IF IT IS TO REAPPEAR AT ALL. RIGHTIST

MILITARY ELEMENTS AND OLD GUARD CONSERVATIVES FORMERLY IDENTIFIED WITH THE THANOM/PRAPHAT GROUP, ARE EXPECTED TO SUPPORT THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PARTY OR THE THAI NATION PARTY, AS THEY DID IN 1975 AND 1976. THERE IS SOME SPECULATION THAT FORMER STRONGMAN PRAPHAT CHARUSATHIAN AND GEN. YOT THEPHASADIN NA AYUTTHAYA ARE INTERESTED

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IN TESTING THE POLITICAL WATERS AND MAY ATTEMPT TO FORM A COALITION OF RIGHTIST POLITICAL FORCES UNDER THE BANNER OF A NEW PARTY. UNDER SUCH A SCHEME PRAPHAT WOULD REMAIN IN THE BACKGROUND AS THE POWER BROKER. THERE IS, AS YET, NO INDICATION THAT PRIME MINISTER KRIANGSAK IS BUSYING HIMSELF WITH PLANS TO FORM HIS OWN PARTY. IF HE DECIDES TO IDENTIFY HIMSELF WITH A PARTY LABEL

AND RUN FOR PARLIAMENT, HE WILL MOST LIKELY LEAVE THE POLITICAL SPADEWORK TO EXPERIENCED POLITICIANS AND "ACCEPT" A ROLE AS PARTY LEADER. KRIA GSAK'S OLD BOSS AT SUPREME COMMAND, ACM (RET.) THAWI CHUNLASAP, WHO HEADED THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PARTY IN 1976, HAS STATED PUBLICLY THAT HE WOULD BE PREPARED TO BUILD A PARTY AROUND THE PRIME MINISTER. THE SOCIALIST PARTIES ARE NOT EXPECTED TO ORGANIZE THEMSELVES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ELECTIONS. END SUMMARY.

1. DESPITE RESTRICTIONS TN POLITICAL PARTIES AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY CONTAINED IN NARC ORDERS 4 AND 6 OF OCT. 6, 1976. THAI POLITICIANS HAVE BEGUN THE MANEUVERING PROCESS WHICH INEVITABLY PRECEDES THE MORE FORMAL ALIGNMENT OF POLITICAL PARTIES. THE PRESENT INTERIM CONSTITUTION CALLS FOR GENERAL ELECTIONS NO LATER THAN

APRIL, 1979, AND WITH THE FIRST DRAFT OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION COMPLETE AND READY FOR SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (NLA) IN APRIL, A NUMBER OF POLITICIANS ARE MAKING PREPARATIONS TO DUST OFF PARTY MACHINERY WHICH HAS BEEN IDLE SINCE 1976.

2. IT IS STILL TOO EARLY TO SPECULATE, EXCEPT IN THE BROADEST OF TERMS, WHAT THE EVENTUAL ALIGNMENT OF POLITICAL PARTIES WILL RESEMBLE. QUITE OBVIOUSLY, POLITICAL ORGANIZING CANNOT BEGIN IN EARNEST UNTIL THE GOVERNMENT LEGALIZES POLITICAL ACTIVITY. THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (NLA) IS NOT LIKELY TO ENACT AN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ELECTION LAW UNTIL IT COMPLETES THE TASK OF REVIEWING THE DRAFT CONSTITUTION, A PROCESS THAT IS EXPECTED TO LAST SEVERAL MONTHS. THE PARLIAMENT TO WHICH POLITICIANS WILL SEEK ELECTION, ON PRESENT READING, IS EXPECTED TO HAVE MORE LIMITED POWERS, THAN WAS THE CASE IN 1975 AND 1976 BEFORE THE COUP, MAKING THE REWARDS OF AN ELECTION VICTORY LESS SIGNIFICANT. TO MAKE THINGS EVEN LESS CERTAIN, THERE HAS BEEN TALK THAT SOME ELEMENTS WITHIN THE BANGKOK BUSINESS COMMUNITY AND THE MILITARY HAVE URGED THE GOVERNMENT TO STAGE A REFERENDUM IN ORDER TO EXTEND THE TENURE OF THE PRESENT RTG LEADERSHIP FOR ANOTHER TWO YEARS. HOWEVER, MOST OBSERVERS FEEL THAT PRIME MINISTER KRIANGSAK WILL FOLLOW THROUGH ON THE COMMITMENT IN THE INTERIM CONSTITUTION TO HOLD PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND THAT THE GENERAL PUBLIC WILL VIEW THE ELECTIONS AS A GENUINE EFFORT TO RESTORE AN ADDED MEASURE OF POLITICAL OPENNESS TO THAILAND.

3. DEMOCRATS -- ESTABLISHED IN 1946, THE MODERATELY CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRAT PARTY, LED BY SENI PRAMOT, HAS RETAINED ITS ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE, WAITING IN THE WINGS FOR MOST OF THE POST-WAR PERIOD AS A CIVILIAN ALTERNATIVE TO MILITARY RULE. THE DEMOCRAT PARTY LEADERSHIP WAS IN DISARRAY DURING ITS FINAL WEEKS IN POWER BEFORE OCT. 6, 1976. FOLLOWING THE COUP, PARTY REGULARS AGREED

THAT SENI'S WEAK LEADERSHIP AND HIS ADVANCED AGE (HE WILL BE 75 THIS YEAR) WOULD MAKE IT NECESSARY FOR THE DEMOCRATS TO SELECT A NEW PARTY LEADER. SENI HAS INDICATED THAT HE WOULD NOT EXPECT TO CONTINUE AS PARTY LEADER.

4. THERE IS NO CLEAR FAVORITE TO SUCCEED SENI. HOWEVER, THREE NAMES ARE MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED AS POSSIBLE SUCCESSORS: PHICHAI RATTAKUN, DAMRONG LATTHIPHIPAT AND UTHAI PIMCHAICHON. PHICHAI, 51, PERFORMED CREDITABLY AS SENI'S FOREIGN MINISTER AND HAS

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SUPPORT FROM MANY OF THE CONSERVATIVE AND BUSINESS ELEMENTS WITHIN THE PARTY. HOWEVER, YOUNGER PARTY MEMBERS, WHO PREFER A STRONGER, MORE PROGRESSIVE AND DYNAMIC LEADER, ARE RELUCTANT TO ENDORSE PHICHAI. SOME OLDER DEMOCRATS HAVE COMPLAINED THAT PHICHAI IS TOO PARSIMONIOUS TO BE AN EFFECTIVE LEADER. AS FORMER PARTY SECRETARY-GENERAL, DAMRONG LATTHIPHIPAT, 45, IS AN EXPERIENCED INSIDER WHO WORKED CLOSELY WITH SENI. HOWEVER, AS LEADER OF THE LEFT OF CENTER FACTION WHICH CONTRIBUTED TO THE BREAKDOWN IN PARTY UNITY IN 1976, DAMRONG WILL HAVE TO OVERCOME SUSPICIONS THAT HE IS OPPORTUNISTIC AND NOT A TEAM PLAYER. UTHAI, EX-SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, HAS PUBLICLY ANNOUNCED HIS DESIRE TO BE NAMED PARTY LEADER. AT 39, HE IS YOUNG AND AMBITIOUS, AND IS WELL REGARDED BY MANY OF THE YOUNGER DEMOCRATS.

5. AS MANEUVERING GROWS WITHIN THE DEMOCRAT PARTY, THE FACTIONS WILL HAVE TO SORT OUT THEIR DIFFERENCES AND SELECT A NEW LEADER. SOME OBSERVERS HAVE SPECULATED RECENTLY THAT A "OUTSIDER" LIKE KHUKRIT WHO COULD BROADEN THE PARTY'S APPEAL AND RECONCILE DIFFERENCES SHOULD BE INVITED TO ASSUME THE REINS OF LEADERSHIP.

HOWEVER, SENI AND KHUKRIT REHAIN ON POOR TERMS, AND KHUKRIT'S RECENT HEALTH PROBLEMS MAY HAVE CANCELLED THIS POSSIBILITY. ANOTHER COMPROMISE HAS BEEN SUGGESTED THAT WOULD LEAPE SENI AS NOMINAL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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LEADER, BUT WITHOUT A SUBSTANTIVE ROLE. SENI IS NOT EXPECTED TO RUN FOR PARLIAMENT.

6. A LIST OF 19 FORMER DEMOCRAT MP'S, PROBABLY DRAWN UP BY DAMRONG, WHO ARE ACCUSED OF "BETRAYING" THE PARTY, HAS APPEARED IN LEAFLETS CIRCULATED AROUND BANGKOK EARLIER THIS YEAR. NAMES INCLUDE EX-INTERIOR MINISTER SAMAK SUNTHORAWET, EX-BANGKOK GOVERNOR THAMMANUM THIANNGOEN, EX-DEPUTY INTERIOR MINISTER (UNDER SENI) SOMBUN SIRITHON AND OTHER LESSER FIGURES ASSOCIATED WITH THE RIGHTIST FACTION OF THE PARTY WHO WERE CRITICAL OF THE PARTY'S LEADERSHIP BEFORE THE OCT. 6 COUP OR WERE CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH THE THANIN GOVERNMENT. ALTHOUGH THE BLACKLIST HAS NO OFFICIAL STANDING, IT IS CLEAR THAT SAMAK AND THE OTHERS HAVE BEEN DISCREDITED IN THE EYES OF MOST PARTY REGULARS AND WILL HAVE A DIFFICULT TIME RESTORING THEIR POLITICAL REPUTATIONS.

7. SOCIAL ACTION PARTY (SAP) -- LIKE THE DEMOCRATS, THE SAP HAS ITS APPEAL AMONG MODERATE CIVILIAN ELEMENTS. PARTY LEADER KHUKRIT PRAMOT'S WIDE REPUTATION AS THAILAND'S SENIOR STATESMAN (SOME WOULD SAY POLITICAL GADFLY) MAKES HIM THE COUNTRY'S MOST INFLUENTIAL AND POPULAR PARTY LEADER. PRESS REPORTS INDICATE THAT YOUNG SAP MEMBERS HAVE HELD ORGANIZATIONAL MEETINGS, AND KHUKRIT HAS RECENTLY STEPPED UP HIS APPEARANCES IN THE PUBLIC SPEAKING CIRCUIT. KHUKRIT SUFFERED A MILD STROKE ON MAR. 9. ALTHOUGH HE APPEARS TO HAVE RECOVERED, THERE IS SPECULATION THAT, AT 67, KHUKRIT MAY NOT BE PHYSICALLY CAPABLE OF BEARING UP TO THE PRESSURES DEMANDED OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP. PARTY STALWARTS INCLUDE INFLUENTIAL BUSINESS LEADERS LIKE BANGKOK BANK PRESIDENT (AND FORMER FINANCE MINISTER) BUNCHU ROCHANASATHIAN. THE MODERATE WEEKLY MAGAZINE, ATHIT, SPECULATED IN A RECENT ARTICLE THAT SOME PROGRESSIVE POLITICIANS, FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH THE NEW FORCE PARTY ARE PREPARED TO SUPPORT SAP, AND A COVER LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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STORY IN THE FEB. 26 ISSUE OF SIAM RATH WEEKLY REPORTS THAT PRASIT KANCHANAWAT, FORMER LEADER OF THE SOCIAL NATIONAL PARTY AND HOUSE SPEAKER DURING THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT, IS CONSIDERING AN ALLIANCE WITH THE SOCIAL ACTION PARTY. SAP COULD ALSO BENEFIT FROM DEFECTIONS WITHIN THE DEMOCRAT PARTY IF THE DEMOCRATS ARE UNABLE

TO SORT OUT THEIR LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS.

8. NEW FORCE PARTY - THE RELATIVELY LEFTIST (BY THAI STANDARDS)  
NEW FORCE PARTY (NFP), WHICH ELECTED ONLY THREE MEMBERS TO  
PARLIAMENT IN THE APRIL, 1976, ELECTIONS, FACES AN ARRAY OF  
SEEMINGLY INSURMOUNTABLE PROBLEMS WHICH MAKES THE NFP'S RETURN TO

THE POLITICAL SCENE PROBLEMATIC. THERE HAS APPARENTLY BEEN LITTLE  
ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITY TO DATE, AND PUBLIC COMMENT BY LEADING  
NEW FORCE FIGURES HAS BEEN PESSIMISTIC AND, AT TIMES, CRITICAL  
OF OTHER PARTY LEADERS. SEVERAL EX-NEW FORCE MAINSTAYS HAVE  
ACCEPTED POSITIONS WITH THE KRIANGSAK GOVERNMENT, INCLUDING FORMER  
PARTY LEADER KRASAE CHANAWONG, WHO SERVES AS AN ADVISOR TO THE  
PRIME MINISTER ON RURAL MEDICAL PROBLEMS; ATHIT URAIRAT, ALSO  
AN ADVISOR AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE; AND PRASIT NARONGDET, WHO IS A  
DEPUTY COMMUNICATIONS MINISTER. SOME NEW FORCERS MIGHT ASSOCIATE  
THEMSELVES WITH KRIANGSAK, SHOULD THE PRIME MINISTER  
SEEK TO  
IDENTIFY HIMSELF WITH A POLITICAL PARTY PRIOR TO THE ELECTIONS.  
OTHERS CAN BE EXPECTED TO JOIN THE SAP OR THE DEMOCRATS.

9. MILITARY-BACKED PARTIES WAA THE OLD GUARD CONSERVATIVES OF THE  
"SAHA PRACHA THAI" (UNITED THAI PEOPLE) CAMP, WHICH SERVED AS A  
POLITICAL VEHICLE FOR FORMER STRONGMEN THANOM AND PRAPHAT IN THE LATE

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1960'S AND EARLY 1970'S WAS FRAGMENTED WHEN THESE  
LEADERS FLED THE COUNTRY IN OCTOBER, 1973. PARTY  
MEMBERS SPLIT INTO SEVERAL GROUPS. ACM (RETIRED)  
THAWI CHUNLASAP WAS REASONABLY SUCCESSFUL IN  
GETTING ONE FACTION TO JOIN THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PARTY,

WHICH HE SECRETLY BACKED AND EVENTUALLY HEADED AS PARTY LEADER IN 1976. ANOTHER GROUP JOINED THE CONSERVATIVE THAI NATION PARTY LED BY FORMER GENERALS PRAMAN ADIREKSAN AND CHATCHAI CHUNHAWAN. OTHERS JOINED SMALLER PARTIES WHICH ADORNED THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN 1975-76.

10. THE NEXT ELECTIONS MAY SEE A CONSOLIDATION OF MILITARY-BACKED PARTIES. IF THE OLD-GUARD CAN SORT OUT THE POTENTIAL FOR SERIOUS LEADERSHIP DIFFERENCES AMONG PRAPHAT, YOT, THAWI AND OTHERS, A NEW, VERY WEALTHY, AND FORMIDABLE POLITICAL ALLIANCE COULD EMERGE. ON THE OTHER HAND, A RIFT AT THE TOP COULD LEAVE THE FAR RIGHT FRAGMENTED INTO GROUPINGS ALONG THE SAME LINES AS IN 1976: THAI NATION, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND VARIOUS SMALLER PARTIES.

11. IT IS NOT YET CLEAR WHAT SORT OF POLITICAL FUTURE PRIME MINISTER KRIANGSAK ENVISIONS FOR HIMSELF. LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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CONVENTIONAL WISDOM DICTATES THAT HE WILL ATTEMPT TO ENTER INTO A POLITICAL ALLIANCE TO GAIN A BASE OF SUPPORT IN PARLIAMENT. AS ONE OBSERVER PUT IT: THANIN CAME IN SAYING HE WOULD STAY IN POWER FOR TWELVE YEARS AND LASTED ONLY ONE; WHILE KRIANGSAK, WHO CAME IN SAYING HE WOULD HOLD POWER FOR ONLY ONE YEAR, MIGHT BE AROUND FOR TWELVE. THE POSSIBILITY ALSO EXISTS THAT KRIANGSAK MAY DECIDE TO STAY ABOVE PARTY POLITICS AND SIMPLY MAKE HIMSELF AVAILABLE AS A CONSENSUS PRIME MINISTER IF, AS EXPECTED, THE NEW CONSTITUTION PERMITS THE PRIME MINISTER TO BE CHOSEN FROM OUTSIDE OF PARLIAMENT.

12. IF KRIANGSAK DOES DECIDE TO RUN IN A PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION, HE MIGHT LOOK FOR SUPPORT FROM HIS FORMER BOSS AT SUPREME COMMAND, THAWI CHUNLASAP, AS WELL AS ELEMENTS WITHIN THE MILITARY WHO WOULD SEEK TO PARLAY KRIANGSAK'S WIDESPREAD POPULAR ACCEPTANCE INTO A MEANS OF RETAINING INFLUENCE AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT.

13. SOCIALIST AND OTHER PARTIES -- THE TWO MAJOR LEFTIST PARTIES, UNITED SOCIALIST FRONT (USF) AND SOCIALIST PARTY OF THAILAND (SPT) WERE SOUNDLY REJECTED BY VOTERS IN THE LAST GENERAL ELECTION (APRIL 1976) AND ARE NOT EXPECTED TO MOUNT A CAMPAIGN WHEN NEW ELECTIONS ARE CALLED. SOCIALISTS WOULD STILL BE HOUNDED BY THE CLAIM USED IN THE 1976 ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN THAT "SOCIALISM IN ANY FORM IS COMMUNISM".

ADDITIONALLY, THEY WOULD FIND IT HARD TO MEET THE REQUIREMENT, REPORTEDLY ADOPTED IN THE DRAFT CONSTITUTION, THAT PARTIES FIELD CANDIDATES IN AT LEAST HALF OF THE ELECTION RACES, AS WELL AS TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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RAISE FUNDING TO CONVER THE COST OF STAGING A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN. MORE FUNDAMENTALLY, MANY OF THE YOUNGER LEFTIST ACTIVISTS HAVE REJECTED HOPE OF ACHIEVING SOCIALIST GOALS THROUGH PARLIAMENTARY MEANS.

14. WHEN IT FINALLY TAKES SHAPE, THE NEW ELECTION LAW IS EXPECTED TO CONTAIN PROVISIONS LIMITING THE NUMBER OF POLITICAL PARTIES. HOWEVER, AS IN THE PAST, A FEW SMALLER PARTIES BUILT AROUND INDIVIDUAL POLITICIANS MAY GARNER ENOUGH SUPPORT TO ELECT CONDIDATES OR TO PLAY THE ROLE OF "SPOILER" IN A TIGHT RACE. THERE HAS BEEN SPECULATION IN THE THAI PRESS THAT FORMER INTERIOR MINISTER SAMAK SUNTORAWET PLANS TO FORM A PARTY TO BE CALLED THE PRACHAKON THAI (THAI POPULACE) PARTY. THOUGH IT IS UNLIKELY HIS PARTY COULD WIELD EFFECTIVE POLITICAL POWER, SAMAK'S FUTURE IN POLITICS SHOULD NOT BE TOTALLY DISCOUNTED. HE IS ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SPEAKERS IN THAILAND AND RETAINS A STRONG FOLLOWING AMOUNG BANGKOK'S LOWER AND MIDDLE CLASSES.

COMMENT: ALTHOUGH THE RELIMINARY POLITICAL JOCKEYING HAS BEGUN ON THE BASIS OF A COMMITMENT BY THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP PAVE THE WAY FOR A RETURN TO DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT, SERIOUS MANEUVR IS NOT LIKELY TO GET UNDERWAY UNTIL THE RTG SPELLS OUT THE TERMS AND THE TIMING OF THE ELECTIONS MORE CLEARLY.  
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## Message Attributes

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